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Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England. Patrick Curry

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Published in:
Isis

DOI:
[10.1086/355784](https://doi.org/10.1086/355784)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
1991

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

North, J. D. (1991). Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England. Patrick Curry. *Isis*, 82(2), 373-374. <https://doi.org/10.1086/355784>

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England by Patrick Curry

Review by: J. D. North

Source: *Isis*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 373-374

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/234878>

Accessed: 11-12-2018 11:44 UTC

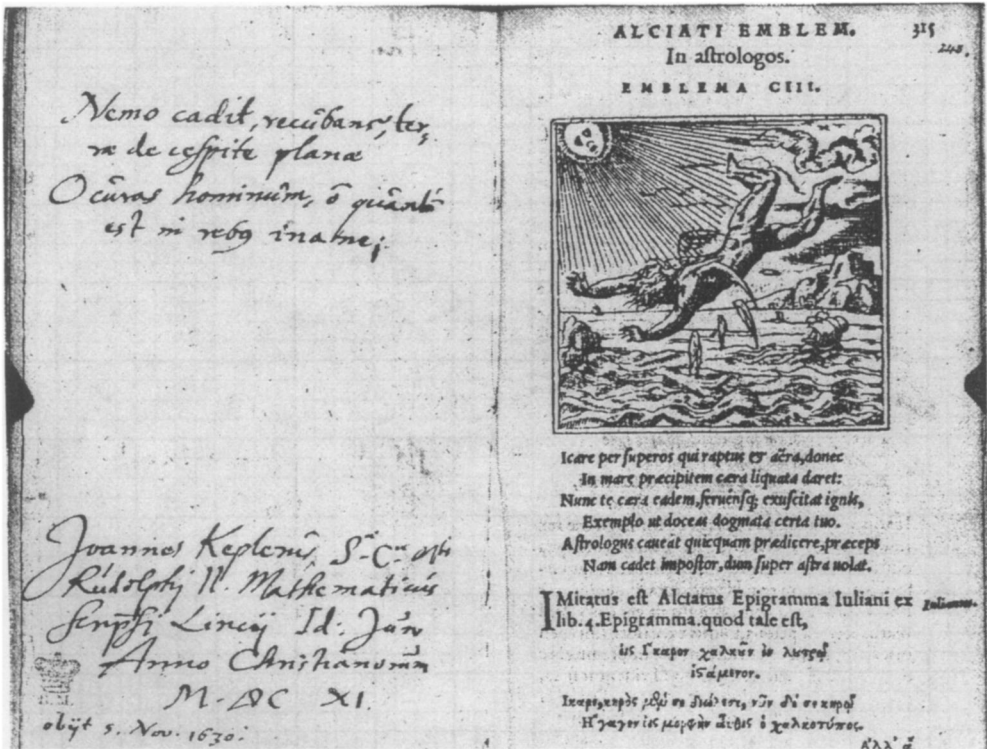
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Icarus as depicted in the Emblemata of Andrea Alciati, published at Lyons in 1573 with a commentary by Francisco Sanches. Alciati explicitly links the fall of Icarus to the errors of astrologers. Giordano Bruno in his Heroici furori instead took the daring of Icarus as a symbol of the quest for knowledge. This British Library copy has autograph comments by Johannes Kepler. (Permission line on page 425.)

tion of the *Heroici furori*, and references to the *De l'infinito universo e mondi* in Harriot's mathematical manuscripts. While her discussion of Bruno's inspiration of the scientific interests of Percy and his associates is far from exhaustive, it does show them wrestling with Bruno's ideas on the infinity of the universe, the minimum and the maximum, and atomism as well as sharing something of his general intellectual adventurousness. Lacking direct references to Bruno in Marlowe and Shakespeare, Gatti's method in these instances relies on discussions of parallels in texts and ideas, which are most richly and persuasively developed regarding *Hamlet*. While ultimate assessment of her arguments here may rest with literary scholars, she suggests a more pervasive legacy for Bruno in England than is often entertained.

While perhaps not the final word on any of these issues, Gatti's studies reflect a command of current work and sensitive

readings of the sources, and suggest a variety of interesting interactions in late Renaissance English culture.

NICHOLAS H. CLULEE

■ Early Modern Period

Patrick Curry. *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England.* ix + 238 pp., bibl., index. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989. \$27.50.

Patrick Curry's principal thesis in *Prophecy and Power* is that the death of astrology in the mid-seventeenth century has been much exaggerated, and that the subject continued to be practiced, and to be implicated in many different forms of English cultural life, throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Since even today one only has to open a newspaper to savor the unwholesome dregs of what was once a

plausible, even in its way commendable, scientific subject, Curry's thesis might not in itself seem surprising. Its strength, however, is in the fine detail of his social analysis, rather than in this, his broadest generalization. His account of the practitioners of astrology and their clientele, seen (as the title of the work intimates) in terms of struggles for power, is closely textured, and certainly not one to which a short review can do justice.

The book is divided into two roughly equal parts. The first, "From Heyday to Crisis," takes us from 1642 to 1710. The former date registers not only the onset of civil war but the collapse of official censorship that resulted in a veritable explosion of astrological publication. The first half of the book ends with Jonathan Swift's notorious satire on the astrologer John Partridge. (Swift first pretended to predict Partridge's death, and later gave a vivid account of the supposed event, which made Partridge a European laughingstock. But it seems not to have harmed his sales performance.) This first period was one in which judicial or horoscopic astrology was to the fore. William Lilley, Elias Ashmole, and John Gadbury were among its more respectable practitioners. They had scientific pretensions, with the consequence that their art suffered from the rise of Newtonian science. What Curry calls "high" or "cosmological-philosophical astrology" suffered even more from this new movement.

The Swift satire symbolizes what for Curry was the character of the following historical phase. It was notably "low" or popular astrology that survived into this next period (nominally 1710–1800), and how it did so is the subject of the second part of the book, "Life after Death." With a wealth of historical detail, Curry shows how all-pervasive was folk astrology, in particular doctrines associated with the waxing and waning of the moon, the sun, and the seasons and with eclipses. Almanacs much given over to weather prediction continued to be produced, and works of astrological medicine, such as the pseudo-Aristotelian *Book of Problems and Aristotle's Masterpiece*. (This much under-rated work is full of wholesome advice, such as how to cure headaches with powdered hog lice in distilled water, and entreaties to avoid an excess of salt in the diet, on the grounds that it inclines the

young to venerary.) If all this was not exactly medieval, that was only because it was cruder.

Curry does not ignore those astrologers who wrote a "better" sort of almanac: one notable instance was Vincent Wing (1619–1668), who sired an astrological dynasty in Rutland, which more or less petered out with the death of Vincent III in 1776. The continuing vulgarization of astrology, however, was its most conspicuous trait in the eighteenth century. Curry presents his account of this process in terms of a view of the social classes owing much to E. P. Thompson. The coherence seen in the mental universe of the astrological believers owed less, it is suggested, to inherent cognitive structures than to the "particular field of force and sociological oppositions peculiar to eighteenth century society" (Thompson). Offering a soupçon of analysis in terms of the current French historical cult of "mentalities," Curry shows how the target of antiastrological rhetoric, which in the late seventeenth century might have been seditious radicalism, by 1776 had become its "tasteless and senseless vulgarity." At the end of his book, he draws on some of Antonio Gramsci's ideas, so that now we hear much of "hegemony." Early modern astrology "became the site of an actual hegemonic struggle only with the successful campaign within the patrician bloc, and the unsuccessful one in relation to the plebeian, when efforts were made to institute an elite interpretation more generally still."

Curry's final argument is rather over-abbreviated and cryptic, but seems to be simply that although the patrician class eliminated astrology from its own ranks, the insularity of the classes meant that plebeian culture remained untouched. In his words, it "continued to include a demotic-democratic potential that proved a seed-bed of later working-class self-discovery." His book is nothing if not a well-documented and entertaining social history of those demotic ingredients. It has little to say of the technicalities of astrology. As a social history it begs to be continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it would take a Lilley or a Partridge to prophesy whether the momentum of *Prophecy and Power* will carry Patrick Curry forward into such a worthwhile enterprise.

J. D. NORTH